SŪRAH 44

Al-Dukhān

(Smoke)

Prologue

Characterized by its short and rhyming verses, violent images and inspirational shades of meaning, this *sūrah* strikes like a hammer, its beat directed at making every human heart tremble. The entire *sūrah* appears to be a single whole, with one central theme to which all its elements are tied: the story the scene from the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, its depiction of the universe and the direct discussion of God's oneness, people's resurrection and God's message.

The *sūrah* begins with a reference to the Qur'ān and its revelation on a blessed night when every matter of wisdom is made clear. Its revelation is an act of mercy for mankind, as well as a warning to them. Moreover, it tells people about their Lord, the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all between them, confirming His oneness. He is the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of everyone who lived and everyone who will come to life.

The *sūrah* abandons this thread in order to speak about the people addressed by the Qur'ān: "*Yet they remain in doubt, playing about.*" (Verse 9) It issues a swift but stern warning against such doubt and play: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous*

is this suffering!" (Verses 10–11) On the day when this suffering befalls them, they will pray for it to be lifted, but once it comes it will not be removed. They are reminded that such suffering has not as yet been inflicted. They should, therefore, seize the opportunity now before they are returned to their Lord when this fearful suffering falls due: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* tells them about Pharaoh and the end he and his people met when a noble messenger from God came and appealed to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God.*" (Verses 18–19) However, they refused to take heed until God's messenger despaired of their ever responding. They were destroyed after having behaved with insolence: "*How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verses 25–29)

Against this backdrop the *sūrah* reverts to their denial of the life to come. They said: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verses 35–36) They are reminded of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba' and are told that they are no better than they were. Therefore, they will not be spared a similar fate.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that there is a link between resurrection and God's wisdom manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand.*" (Verses 38–39) It then tells them about the Day of Decision, which is the time appointed for all of them. It adds here a violent scene depicting the suffering of the guilty who are made to eat of the Zaqqūm tree. It shows them how a sinful person is dragged into the midst of the blazing fire, where scalding water is poured over his head in recompense for his sins: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verses 49–50)

Side by side with this scene is an image of the blessings enjoyed in heaven by the God-fearing. This is a profound image, one that contrasts with the great suffering endured by the other group, and fits with the strong beat of the *sūrah*. This then ends with another reference to the Qur'ān, coupled with a strong and implicit warning: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

From start to finish the *sūrah* uses a continuous and fast beat, and puts before the human mind a succession of images and impressions that are characteristically powerful. It takes us on a long journey that includes the heavens and the earth, the present world and the next, heaven and hell, the past and the present, life and death, the laws of creation and those of the universe, of worlds that are perceptible as well as those that are imperceptible. Relatively short as it is, the *sūrah* provides a grand tour of the world around us and of that which lies beyond our perceptive faculties.

I

Smoke That Ushers Clarity

Al-Dukhān (Smoke)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. (3)

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةٍ مُّبَارَكَةٍ إِنَّا كُنَّا مُنذِرِينَ ﴿٣﴾

On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear (4)

فِيهَا يُفْرَقُ كُلُّ أَمْرٍ حَكِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] (5)

أَمْرًا مِّنْ عِندِنَا ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا مُرْسِلِينَ ﴿٥﴾

رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; (6)

رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُم مُّوقِنِينَ ﴿٧﴾

the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. (7)

لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors. (8)

بَلْ هُمْ فِى شَكٍّ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. (9)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ يَوْمَ تَأْتِى ٱلسَّمَآءُ بِدُخَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. (10)

يَغْشَى ٱلنَّاسَ ۖ هَٰذَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! (11)

رَبَّنَا ٱكْشِفْ عَنَّا ٱلْعَذَابَ إِنَّا مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' (12)

أَنَّىٰ لَهُمُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ وَقَدْ جَآءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; (13)

but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' (14)

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا مُعَلَّمٌ مَّجْنُونٌ ﴿١٤﴾

We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. (15)

إِنَّا كَاشِفُوا الْعَذَابِ قَلِيلًا إِنَّكُمْ عَائِدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution. (16)

يَوْمَ نَبْطِشُ الْبَطْشَةَ الْكُبْرَىٰ إِنَّا مُنتَقِمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, (17)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! (18)

أَنْ أَدُّوا إِلَيَّ عِبَادَ اللَّهِ إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. (19)

وَأَن لَّا تَعْلُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنِّي آتِيكُم بِسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩﴾

I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. (20)

وَإِنِّي عُذْتُ بِرَبِّي وَرَبِّكُمْ أَن تَرْجُمُونِ ﴿٢٠﴾

If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' (21)

وَإِن لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا لِي فَاعْتَزِلُونِ ﴿٢١﴾

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ مُّجْرِمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' (22)

فَأَسْرِ بِعِبَادِى لَيْلًا إِنَّكُم مُّتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; (23)

وَٱتْرُكِ ٱلْبَحْرَ رَهْوًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ جُندٌ مُّغْرَقُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' (24)

كَمْ تَرَكُوا۟ مِن جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, (25)

وَزُرُوعٍ وَمَقَامٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, (26)

وَنَعْمَةٍ كَانُوا۟ فِيهَا فَٰكِهِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

and good things in which they used to delight! (27)

كَذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَأَوْرَثْنَٰهَا قَوْمًا ءَاخَرِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. (28)

فَمَا بَكَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُنظَرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (29)

وَلَقَدْ نَجَّيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ مِنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلْمُهِينِ ﴿٣٠﴾

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, (30)

مِن فِرْعَوْنَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَالِيًا مِّنَ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. (31)

We chose them knowingly above all other people. (32)

وَلَقَدِ ٱخْتَرْنَٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (33)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ مَا فِيهِ بَلَٰٓؤٌا۟ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Now these people assert: (34)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. (35)

إِنْ هِىَ إِلَّا مَوْتَتُنَا ٱلْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُنشَرِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (36)

فَأْتُوا۟ بِـَٔابَآئِنَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? (37)

أَهُمْ خَيْرٌ أَمْ قَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. (38)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَٰعِبِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. (39)

مَا خَلَقْنَٰهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. (40)

إِنَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْفَصْلِ مِيقَٰتُهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلًى عَن مَّوْلًى شَيْـًٔا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support (41)

إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (42)

إِنَّ شَجَرَتَ ٱلزَّقُّومِ ﴿٤٣﴾

The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree (43)

طَعَامُ ٱلْأَثِيمِ ﴿٤٤﴾

will be the food of the sinful; (44)

كَٱلْمُهْلِ يَغْلِى فِى ٱلْبُطُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

like molten lead will it boil in the belly, (45)

كَغَلْىِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

like the boiling of scalding water. (46)

خُذُوهُ فَٱعْتِلُوهُ إِلَىٰ سَوَآءِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٤٧﴾

'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; (47)

ثُمَّ صُبُّوا۟ فَوْقَ رَأْسِهِۦ مِنْ عَذَابِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٨﴾

then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! (48)

ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْكَرِيمُ ﴿٤٩﴾

Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! (49)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا مَا كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

This is the very thing you surely doubted.' (50)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى مَقَامٍ أَمِينٍ ﴿٥١﴾

The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, (51)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

amid gardens and fountains, (52)

يَلْبَسُونَ مِن سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ
مُّتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. (53)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَزَوَّجْنَٰهُم بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. (54)

يَدْعُونَ فِيهَا بِكُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. (55)

لَا يَذُوقُونَ فِيهَا ٱلْمَوْتَ
إِلَّا ٱلْمَوْتَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ۖ وَوَقَىٰهُمْ
عَذَابَ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, (56)

فَضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ
ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٥٧﴾

an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (57)

فَإِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَٰهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. (58)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ إِنَّهُم مُّرْتَقِبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Wait, then; they too are waiting. (59)

The Blessed Night

> Ḥā. Mīm. *By the book that makes things clear! We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.* (Verses 1–8)

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*, making an oath by them and by the book composed of letters like them, making things clear. We have spoken elsewhere about these separate letters occurring at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān. The point to add here is that making them the subject of an oath is just like taking an oath on the book. Every single letter, representing a sound, is a true miracle, or one of God's signs manifested in man's make-up, giving him the ability to speak. They also identify the order in which alphabetical sounds occur along the vocal tract, the symbol representing the letter and its sound, as also man's ability to gather information through them. All these are significant facts that grow in our minds when we seriously reflect on them.

What the oath asserts is the revelation of the book on a blessed night: "*We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 3–6) The reference to the night on which the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high most probably means – although God knows best – the night when its revelation first started. It was a night during the month of Ramaḍān, which is described in the following words: "*It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed.*" (2: 185) The Qur'ān was not revealed in full on that night, nor was all the Qur'ān revealed during Ramaḍān. It had only

started to make contact with the earth, and that night was the first time such contact was made.

Blessed indeed is the night which brought such great goodness to mankind, allowing the Divine system to be implemented in human life, and providing people with a chance to be in touch with the major laws that govern the universe. These are given in easy translation in the Qur'ān, enabling human nature to respond to them and implement them with ease and comfort. It then enables a human community to be established, one based on the rules and responses of the nature God placed in man, living in harmony with the universe around it. It establishes a system that is naturally clean and honourable, free of unnecessary restrictions, under which man lives on earth but by which he maintains his contact with heaven.

Those who were the first to receive the Qur'ān lived during a remarkable period of history when they were in direct contact with God. He told them what they felt in different situations, making them feel, time after time, that He was looking after them. For their part, they took all this into account, in every move and action they performed, and every thought they entertained. They appealed to Him at every turn, trusting that He would always respond to them.

When that generation passed away, the Qur'ān remained an open book that directly addresses human hearts. When people open themselves to it, its effect surpasses magic. It transforms their feelings in a way that is heard of only in great legends. The Qur'ān has remained ever since a complete and clear system that can establish a model human community in any environment and at any time. What it creates is a type of human life that lives within its local environment and time and adopts the unique Islamic system with all its special qualities. This is the distinctive mark of the Divine system, and it applies to everything that God makes. Human beings make what suits them at a particular period of time and in a particular situation. God's work, on the other hand, is perfect, fulfilling all needs, suited to all times and situations, combining permanent truths with variable forms, all in perfect harmony.

God bestowed the Qur'ān from on high on that remarkable night to warn people in the first place: "*We have always sent warnings.*" (Verse 3)

The very fact that the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high on that blessed night makes this a deciding point: "*On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear.*" (Verse 4) The Qur'ān certainly set things apart, distinguishing the permanent truth from powerless falsehood. Limits were established and the road along which man should travel through life was charted. This is the road man should follow for the rest of life. Thus, none of the fundamental issues of human life are left ambiguous. Everything is made clear in the Divine message. All this has been accomplished by God's command and by His will to send messengers to clarify matters for all mankind: "*By Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance].*" (Verse 5)

All this has been done as an act of mercy bestowed on mankind for all future generations up to the Day of Judgement: "*As a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) Nothing manifests God's mercy like the revelation of the Qur'ān. With consummate ease, it appeals directly to people's hearts as easily as the blood flowing through their veins. In this way, it transforms man into a noble creature. With Qur'ānic guidance, human society becomes more like a dream world, yet it is there for eyes to see. The faith the Qur'ān outlines profoundly engages hearts and minds so as to be loved passionately. The question here is not one of meticulous perfection, goodness and suitability. It is much more than that. It is a scenario in which every one of these qualities is further enhanced until their perfection attains a beauty that permeates all details and combines and harmonizes them while at the same time maintaining their close links to the main body.

"*As a mercy from your Lord.*" this is how the Qur'ān was revealed on that blessed night. "*He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) He hears and He knows. He reveals what He reveals to people on the basis of His knowledge of what they say and do, as well as what is suitable and beneficial for them of laws, regulations and directives. He is the One who is in control of the universe, taking care of all who live on it. He is "*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers.*" (Verse 7) The revelations He bestows from on high to mould people's lives is part of His Lordship of the universe and of His laws that operate in the universe.

The reference in this verse to firm belief implies an allusion to the unbelievers' confused beliefs. They recognized God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth but they, nevertheless, associated partners with Him. This means that the central principle of God's oneness was blurred in their minds, and this precluded them from having firm and reassured beliefs.

God is also the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of all generations of creation: "*There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.*" (Verse 8) Both the initiation of life and its deathly end are witnessed by all and are recognized as being beyond the power of any creature. This is clear at first sight and with simple consideration. The scene of death, like the scene of new life, touches the human heart and leaves a very strong influence on it, making it ready to respond. Hence, they are often mentioned in the Qur'ān to attract people's attention to them.

Clarifying Smoke

At this point, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' own situation, which was the opposite of the seriousness with which they should have dealt with God's revelations:

> *Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! [They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.* (Verses 9–16)

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet that they are playing about when the situation requires seriousness, and that they continue to be in doubt about God's confirmed revelations. He is, therefore, instructed to

leave them until they face a day of great hardship: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering.*" (Verses 10–11)

Scholars during the early period of Islam differed in their views about what the smoke mentioned in this verse means. Some of them maintained that it will occur on the Day of Judgement, which makes the warning implied here similar to other warnings in the Qur'ān about that day. They said that this will surely take place and that the Prophet awaited it. Others said that it actually did take place just as the Qur'ān states. It was then lifted after the Prophet prayed God to so remove it.[1]

We, though, are more in agreement with the view expressed by Ibn 'Abbās and explained by Ibn Kathīr making it clear that the smoke will appear on the Day of Judgement. Similar warnings also occur elsewhere in the Qur'ān. What it means here is that these people doubt and play. Leave them, then, in anticipation of that terrible day when the skies shall bring smoke that makes things clear. As it envelops people, their suffering will be particularly painful. Their appeals for help is described thus: "*[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.*" (Verse 12) They are told that a positive response to their appeal is impossible. It is now too late: "*How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!'*" (Verses 13–14) They claimed that a non-Arab person or people taught the Prophet the Qur'ān, and they further alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was a madman.

Having given them this image of a time when they appeal in vain, they are told that they still have a chance, which they should not lose. While they are still in this life, their punishment is delayed. If they believe now, as they will later promise they would if returned, they

1. The author adds here lengthy quotations from *Ḥadīth* anthologies and from commentaries on the Qur'ān in support of both views. To include these in full would perhaps be tedious for an English reader. They are no more than endorsements of each of the two views, showing the evidence on which each relies. Therefore, these quotations have been omitted in this edition. – Editor's note.

will have acted whilst they have the time to prove their sincerity. Nothing is lost yet, so they better act now before they are returned to God. When they are returned to Him: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught,*" when the smoke envelops people. "*We will indeed exact retribution,*" for the play you indulge in and the falsehood you level at the Prophet describing him as *'taught by others, a madman',* when he is God's trusted messenger.

Drowning Pharaoh

A very brief account of the history of Moses and Pharaoh is then added. It concludes with a mighty strike in this present life, corresponding to the mighty onslaught that will strike them on the day when the skies will bring forth their smoke:

> *We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.* (Verses 17–33)

This round starts with a strong note alerting people to the fact that when God sends a messenger to a certain community, this may represent

a special test for them. Likewise, allowing those who oppose the messenger and reject his message a period of time during which they may persist in their arrogance, persecuting the messenger and those who believe in him, may also be a special sort of test. When a community exhausts the patience of God's messenger, leaving him despairing of their ever being positive towards the Divine message, their action may incur a stern punishment: "*We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people.*" (Verse 17) We tested them with prosperity and power in the land, as well as all means of affluence and power. "*There came to them a noble messenger.*" (Verse 17) This was a part of their test, showing how they responded to God's messenger who asked nothing for himself in return. He only called on them to believe in God and demonstrate their readiness to give everything to God, leaving nothing for themselves when it comes to sacrifice for His sake. Thus, the messenger said to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.*" (Verses 18–21)

These are clear words, in short sentences, outlining what Moses asks of his people. He is advising them to make a complete response and submit totally to God. It does not behove God's servants to exalt themselves against Him. As Moses gives them God's message, together with clear and irrefutable proof that he is God's messenger, he seeks God's help and protection should they attack him. If they persist in their erring ways, unwilling to believe in God, he asks them to leave him alone, move away from him. This is extremely fair behaviour. Tyranny, however, is rarely willing to deal in fairness. It fears should the truth remain free, approaching people peacefully. It, therefore, resorts to strong, hard tactics in its efforts to impose its absolute authority. It cannot afford for the truth to make any in-roads and thus win minds and hearts over to its side. Hence, tyranny and falsehood strike hard. They stone any advocate of the truth, seeking to persecute them in every possible way.

The *sūrah* leaves out several episodes of this story to pick up its thread as it approaches its end. Moses realizes that people will not

respond to him positively. Nor will they adopt either of the two options he offered them: accepting his status or moving away from him. He is certain that they are genuinely guilty, with no hope of their ever changing their ways. Therefore, he makes his ultimate appeal to his Lord: "*He then called out to his Lord, saying: These people are lost in sin.*" (Verse 22) What means a messenger of God has other than to submit the outcome of his efforts to his Lord? Moses presents his account and leaves matters to God to deal with as He pleases.

Moses received an endorsement from God with regard to his evaluation of his peoples' status: they were truly guilty: "*Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verses 23–24) That their flight was to occur at night comes in for stronger emphasis in the Arabic text: the verb *asri*, translated as 'set forth', implies that the march must be under cover of darkness, then the verse adds the word *laylan*, meaning 'by night'. Thus they set forth stealthily, at night, unseen by Pharaoh and his watchmen. Furthermore, they were instructed not to make any disturbance in the parted sea as they crossed through it. Thus, Pharaoh and his host would be tempted to pursue them and God's will would then be as He had determined: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) Thus, God's will is done through apparent causes, but these causes are part and parcel of His will and how it is accomplished.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of this mass drowning in words that express God's will, which inevitably comes to pass: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) This is followed with a comment highlighting Pharaoh's humiliation as also of those who supported his arrogant tyranny. They are utterly humiliated in a world where they behaved with all arrogance. How fitting! Those very people bowed their heads before Pharaoh, bewitched by his power, yet he is of no significance in this world. When his power is withdrawn, there is nothing he can do to regain it. No one mourns his loss.

> *How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit*

it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (Verses 25–29)

The scene begins with an image of the splendid comfort in which they dwelled: gardens, fountains, plants, high position, honour and blessings in which they revelled. Yet all this is taken away from them, or they are removed from it, so as to give it to others. In another *sūrah*, the Qur'ān says: "*We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel.*" (26: 59) Whilst the Children of Israel did not inherit Pharaoh's kingdom *per se*, they were nonetheless given a similar kingdom in another land. What is meant, then, is that the same kind of kingdom and blessings that were taken away from Pharaoh and his people were given to the Children of Israel.

What happened next? Those same tyrants, who had gloried in their power and who were held in awe by people, were removed altogether. None grieved for them. Neither earth nor heaven felt their loss. Nor were they given any reprieve: "*Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verse 29) The statement carries connotations of humiliation and total disregard. No one on earth or in heaven was sorry about how these tyrants met their end. They were crushed like ants under foot. The whole universe hated them because they had split themselves away from it. This is a universe that believes in its Lord while they denied Him. Theirs were evil souls, untouchable by the universe in which they lived. Had these tyrants felt what these words imply, they would have foreseen their own humiliation and known that the universe looks upon them as creatures apart.

This is then contrasted with an image of those who are saved and blessed with honour:

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (Verses 30–33)

It was from '*humiliating suffering*' that the Children of Israel were saved. This contrasts with the humiliation that the Egyptian tyrants

and transgressors found themselves in. They were saved "*from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then mentions the fact that God chose the Children of Israel, knowing all about them, with both their positive and negative qualities. Yet He chose them in preference to all other people in their own time. God knew that they were, at the time, the best people to be given the trust. This despite all that He has mentioned in the Qur'ān about their deviation and slow response. Perhaps God made His choice on the basis that whilst they did not then attain the high standard of faith He required, they would nonetheless be the best under a faithful leadership that led them along the straight path of faith and insight.

"*And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.*" (Verse 33) Thus, in turn, the Children of Israel were tested by means of these signs. When the test was over and their time in charge came to its end, God punished them for their deviation and evil. It was as a result of this test that God abandoned them; indeed, they were smashed by those who left them in their Diaspora. They were to suffer humiliation and were warned that God will re-punish them whenever they transgress and behave with arrogance. This warning remains true as long as human life continues.

Doubting Resurrection

Once more the *sūrah* takes up the unbelievers' doubts and denial of resurrection and accountability. Here, too, resurrection is linked to the fact that the structure of the universe is raised on a foundation of truth and seriousness that requires accountability and requital after resurrection:

> *Now these people assert: 'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day*

when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (Verses 34–42)

The Arab idolaters used to say that people die once only and that is the end; no resurrection and no further life. They called this the first death, meaning that it precedes what they were promised of a second life after resurrection. To them, the proof of this assertion was contained in the fact that none of their forefathers who died had ever returned; none had been resurrected. They demanded that their forefathers should be brought back to life before their eyes if resurrection were indeed true. They thus betrayed their ignorance of the purpose of resurrection. They did not understand that it is a further stage of human life, with a definite purpose and a clear goal, which is the administration of requital for what was done in the first stage. Thus, God's obedient servants reach their noble destination, which they have earned through acting well in their first lives, while hardened sinners arrive at the miserable and filthy end they deserve. This means that resurrection will come about after the entire first stage of life has ended, i.e. man's time on earth has concluded. It precludes that resurrection should be the result of a human wish expressed by an individual or a community, so that they can believe in it. Indeed, faith is not complete unless one believes in resurrection, which God's messengers have confirmed, and which is apparent to anyone who reflects on the nature of life and God's wisdom in creating it in this way. Such reflection is sufficient on its own to believe in the Day of Judgement.

Before the *sūrah* invites them to reflect on the design of the universe, it shakes their hearts strongly, reminding them of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba',[2] in South Arabia. This story must have been well known to the Arabs, as the *sūrah* makes only a brief reference to it, warning them against a similarly terrible fate: "*Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because*

2. Tubba' was the title given to the kings of Ḥimyar, a major tribe that lived in southern Arabia. – Editor's note.

they were lost in sin?" (Verse 37) As this reminder makes them shudder, they are called upon to reflect on the perfect design of the heavens and earth, and how the universe is finely balanced and well planned, indicating that it is deliberately made in this way for a particular purpose: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 38–42) There is a fine and delicate relation between the creation of the heavens, the earth and all that is in between them on the one hand and the question of resurrection and accountability on the other. Human nature can easily understand this when attention is drawn to it in the way described here.

Such reflection should take into account the creation of the universe, what it points to of elaborate planning, wise purpose, perfect balance and harmony, the creation of everything in accurate measure and quantity placing it thus in harmony with everything around it. Such reflection undoubtedly leads to the conclusion that everything is created on purpose. No coincidence or carelessness is allowed in any aspect, major or trivial, of the design of the huge celestial bodies or the small, fine creatures living on them. Thus, we realize that the universe is created for a purpose, which means that nothing of it is the result of idle play; and that it is based on the truth, which means that no falsehood is allowed to infiltrate it. We further realize that it must have an end, which does not occur at the point of death after a short journey on earth. Logically speaking, a second life, when reward and punishment are administered, is inevitable, so that good and evil come to their natural ends. Man has been so created as to be susceptible to both tendencies of good and evil. It is through his will and effort that he chooses one or the other, making himself liable to ultimately receive its reward or punishment, as the case may be.

That man is so created, with both tendencies, and that God's action cannot be mere idle play, means that man will have a specific fate

which he meets after his journey on earth is over. This is the essence of the hereafter. Hence, it is mentioned after attentions have been drawn to the wise purpose that lies beyond the creation of the universe: "*The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 40–42)

This statement comes naturally at this point, closely related as it is to what went before it. It is absolute wisdom that requires that creatures should have a day when judgement is made between those who follow true guidance and those who go astray; when goodness is rewarded and evil humiliated; when people have no support, bond or relation. They will return to their Creator as individuals, just like He created them, to be requited for what they did in life. No one will support them or offer a gesture of mercy, except for those on whom God bestows His grace. It is from God's hand that they came out to work in life, and to His hand they will return to receive what their actions deserve. In between, they have a chance to act, just as they are being tested.

Two Different Fates

The final scene in the *sūrah* depicts the two different ends of the believers and the unbelievers. Again, the scene and its images are violent, in keeping with the *sūrah*'s general ambiance:

> *The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree will be the food of the sinful; like molten lead will it boil in the belly, like the boiling of scalding water. 'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.'*
>
> *The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, amid gardens and fountains, wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. There they can call for every*

kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (Verses 43–57)

The scene begins with an image of the Zaqqūm tree, which is stated to provide the food of sinners. It is a powerful image that strikes fear and panic in the audience's hearts. The closest thing we know to this food is the lees, the sediment that remains when oil has been long boiled. This lees continues to boil in their bellies like molten lead. The sinful person who behaved towards his Lord and His trusted messenger with arrogance will be standing there. An order is issued to the guards of hell to take him away in a brutal manner that suits his 'honourable' position: "*Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water.*" (Verses 47–48) Drag him away so as to make him feel his humiliation, for there is no honour for such sinners! When he gets there, pour scalding water over his head so as to burn his skin. Then, added to all this punishment is a strong rebuke: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man!*" (Verse 49) This is indeed the fate best suited to the one who boasted of his power and honour. Now he has none of this, because his boasting was an affront to God and His messengers. "*This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verse 50) When you were warned against this fate, you received the warning with mockery, doubting that it would ever happen.

Our eyes stretch to the other side to see the God-fearing who took the warning seriously and feared what may happen on this day of decision. We see them '*in a safe position*', where there is nothing to fear and no harsh treatment. They revel in their splendour '*amid gardens and fountains*'. Their garments are made of silk and brocade. They take their positions facing one another talking about whatever is of concern to them. In addition, they are given pure companions with beautiful eyes to make their bliss perfect. There, in heaven, they are the 'owners' of the place. They can ask for whatever they want and it will be given: "*There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security.*" (Verse 55) They expect no end to this happiness, as death

does not occur here. They have already died once and they will not be made to taste death again. This contrasts with what the unbelievers used to say in this present world: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again.*" (Verse 35) In the unbelievers' case, the one death is followed by suffering in hell. The believers, who are in heaven, "*shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 56) This is yet another aspect of God's favour which He bestows on believers. No one is saved from suffering on the Day of Judgement unless the Lord grants this favour. It is all through "*an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 57)

The *sūrah* concludes with a reminder of the great blessing God has bestowed on us by sending His message to warn us against the consequences of disbelief: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

It is a fitting conclusion that sums up the message of the *sūrah*, reflects its ambiance, and fits with its beginning and line of discussion. It started with a reference to the book God revealed as a reminder for people so that they may take heed. It warned against what may happen on the Day of Judgement, with God saying: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16) The two short verses at the end remind them of the favour God granted them by giving them the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, which they understand. They are finally given an implicit but nonetheless fearful warning: "*Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verse 59)